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DIALOGUE IN THE QUR'AN

Mustansir Mir

And God actually spoke with Moses. (Qur'an 4: 164)

I. PRELIMINARY

In *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Robert Alter speaks of "the highly subsidiary role [in the Old Testament] of narration in comparison to direct speech by the characters," identifying the "primacy of dialogue" as "the peculiarity of the Hebrew mode of presentation" (64-65). While the Qur'anic mode of presentation differs in some respects from the Biblical, a subject we shall take up a little later, the Qur'an's use of the device of dialogue is no less conspicuous than the Bible's. A cursory look at *Joseph*, the twelfth *surah* ("chapter"),[1] will bring out the importance the Qur'an attaches to dialogue as a structural principle; as Anthony Johns says, "the events of the [Joseph] story are communicated through the dialogue" (31 ff.).[2] But unlike Biblical dialogue, Qur'anic dialogue has not attracted much attention. Richard Bell, referring to the scenes of Judgment Day in the Qur'an, writes:

> Attention should, however, be called to the dramatic quality of many of these scenes, which is often unrecognized, but which is really very effective. . . . The dramatic quality is, in fact, a pervading characteristic of Qur'an style. Direct speech is apt to be 'interjected' at any point, and we have to imagine the personages spoken of in the narrative as expressing themselves in words. If, for instance, we look at the story of Moses in [S.] XX, we find that more space is occupied by the spoken words of the actors than by actual narrative. (77-78)

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Although he notes the frequent use of direct speech in the Qur'an, Bell apparently does not think that this use of direct speech has any deeper significance. Indeed, his view that direct speech in the Qur'an has an "interjectory"—and hence possibly irruptive or intrusive—character suggests dialogue to be a somewhat peculiar rather than a positively significant feature of Qur'anic style and is hardly meant to encourage a sustained study of that feature. It is no wonder that W. Montgomery Watt, in his revision of Bell's work, leaves Bell's treatment of the dialogue in the Qur'an virtually unaltered (80-81). Rudi Paret, too, contents himself with repeating Bell. He writes:

> In the narrative passages direct speech is used freely and we sometimes even find statements and replies. There are positively dramatic eschatological scenes with regular dialogues . . ." (200-201)

Paret's remark leads one to conclude that, in the thirty years since Bell's work, nothing new had been said on the subject. In fact, judging from Alford Welch's *Encyclopaedia of Islam* article on the Qur'an, which provides a quick but good review of Western scholarship on the Qur'an although it contains no mention of dialogue in the Qur'an, one would think that the subject has been relegated to the background. Neither does Muslim scholarship offer a more satisfactory treatment of Qur'anic dialogue. For example, Sayyid Qutb of Egypt studied the Qur'anic narrative art in his well-known *At-Taswir al-Fanni fi l-Qur'an*, but the book, which otherwise contains some excellent insights, shows little appreciation of Qur'anic dialogue as a literary technique. Another Egyptian writer, 'Abd al-Karim al-Khatib, in his *Al-Qasas al-Qur'ani* devotes almost all of chapter three to dialogue in the Qur'an, but he confines himself largely to writing brief glosses on certain individual Qur'anic dialogues.

Dialogue in the Qur'an has thus received little scholarly attention. In this paper I shall argue that, as a literary feature of the Qur'an, it is both interesting and important and, as such, calls for systematic study. After discussing a few theoretical issues in the next section (II), I shall present, in Section III, a typology of Qur'anic dialogues and will explain the structure of a typical dialogue in the Qur'an. Section IV will make an intensive study of a representative dialogue from the Qur'an. In Section V the use of dialogue in the Qur'an will be briefly compared with its use in the Bible and in pre-Islamic Arabic, or *Jahili*, poetry. Thus, Section II is theoretical; Sections III and IV are—each in a different way—analytical; and Section V is comparative. A final section will offer concluding remarks.

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II. THEORETICAL ISSUES

Definition

How is dialogue to be defined for the purposes of this study? I shall attempt to offer only a working definition, hoping that the discussion to follow will provide further clarification. By dialogue I mean a significant verbal exchange that takes place between two or more parties in a given situation. The stipulation of "significant verbal exchange" excludes exchanges that are all too brief or are only of incidental importance in a given context. In Q. 18: 93-98, for example, Dhu l-Qarnayn,[3] asked by a certain people for help against the incursions of Gog and Magog, offers to build a wall for their defense. I do not call this a dialogue. The stipulation, "in a given situation," excludes exchanges whose continuity is broken by a lapse of time or shift of venue, with the break indicated in the text explicitly or implicitly.[4]

Dialogical Situation

But this definition raises a question: Are there enough dialogical situations in the Qur'an to warrant a study of them? How much "dialogue" can one expect to find in a book that does not seem to have much sustained composition and moves from one subject to another within a few verses? Two points should be noted.

First, it is true that a large number of conversations reported in the Qur'an are short, simple exchanges that are not dialogues in a strict sense, but there are others, like 18: 65-83 (Moses and Khidr[5]) and 26: 16-37 (Moses and Pharaoh), which are fairly extended and have all the elements we normally associate with a dialogue.

Second, one has to understand the nature of Qur'anic narrative. Hardly if ever does the Qur'an provide in one place complete details of an event or story (Qutb 128 ff.). The amount of information it provides in a given place about something is, as a rule, determined by the needs of the context. Thus, a story may be split up into so many pieces with the different pieces related in different places, or the same piece may be related in two different *surahs* in two somewhat differing versions. The same applies to Qur'anic dialogues. The Moses-Pharaoh dialogue, referred to above, occurs in several *surahs*, and with variations. The Qur'anic narrative method being what it is, it would seem reasonable, and also practical, to regard as a dialogue any conversation that meets the criterion of "significant verbal exchange." In other words, a short conversation should not *ipso facto* be excluded from consideration.

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It must, however, be admitted that the definition of dialogue presented here will not help decide every case with absolute certainty, and that borderline or doubtful cases will remain. But, as stated above, the definition is a working one and will have served its purpose if it contributes, in a practical way, to a better understanding of a certain literary feature of the Qur'an.

Positive Reasons

So far we have offered negative reasons for studying the feature of dialogue in the Qur'an—reasons why it should not be neglected. But there also are several positive reasons—theological, literary, and historical—for undertaking such a study.

1) Gabriel Josipovici, in his article, "The Bible: Dialogue and Distance," writes:

> For it is one of the characteristics of dialogue that it both maintains distance between the two people engaged in it, and bridges that distance. In the words of Walter Benjamin, "it does not abolish distance but brings it to life." (136)

This remark might have been made about the divine-human dialogue in the Qur'an. It is sometimes said that the God of the Qur'an is almost utterly transcendent. Doubtless the Qur'an lays great stress on the majesty and omnipotence of God, seeking to vindicate the "otherness" of God ("There is nothing like Him" [Q. 42: 11]), but it does so not in order to establish an impassable barrier between God and man, but in order to safeguard the integrity of God's deity. The dialogue between God and man accentuates this point. Q. 4: 164, the epigraph of this paper, signifies that the divine-human dialogue represents a special favor that man receives from God. And the dialogue between God and Moses reported in Q. 7: 143 ff., in which Moses requests God to manifest Himself to him, comes closest to maintaining, bridging, and bringing to life the distance that exists between God and man.[6] Again, dialogue is used in the Qur'an to mediate some of the major "transactions" between God and man. For example, the Primordial Covenant (Q. 7: 172-73) between God and man, of which the particular covenants are historical instances, is represented as having taken place in a situation of dialogue. In the words of Josipoviciz: "Promises and covenants are only an extension of dialogue" (143).

2) The opening *surah* of the Qur'an virtually comes to an end with verse 5, *ihdina s-sirata l-mustaqima* ("Guide us to the Straight Path"). But it goes on to say: "The path of those You blessed, not of those who incurred Your wrath." Until verse 5 the person speaks in general terms,

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praising God and seeking His guidance. But with the aforesaid addition, the speaker enters into history—into the drama of history—seeking identification with certain figures in that drama while condemning and rejecting certain others. A similar function is served by dialogue in the Qur'an. For it is one thing to narrate, in third person, the struggle between good and evil, and quite another to embody good and evil in characters of flesh and blood and present them before one's eyes in situations in which they express their commitments and put all the weight of their personalities behind their utterances. Dialogue thus constitutes a medium the Qu'ran uses to offer a dramatic illustration of its themes. These illustrations are provided in two main forms. Sometimes a thesis is stated, and then dialogue is used to illustrate it. For example, Q. 2: 256-57 says that truth has become distinct from falsehood, that it is up to the individual to choose one or the other, and that God guides those who believe; whereas, the *taghut*[7] misguide those who follow them. Three brief dialogues follow in verses 258-60 (between Abraham and the king; between a certain believer and God; and between Abraham and God), exemplifying the rule laid down in verses 256-57. Sometimes a dialogue is reported first and is followed by a statement of the thesis. For example, Q. 5: 32 speaks of the law of *qisas* ("vengeance, retaliation") that was given to the Israelites. Leading up to the statement of that law is the story of Cain and Abel, which is presented in the form of a dialogue (verses 27-31).

Let us take one or two more examples. (a) The Qur'an holds that the different religious dispensations man has received from God have essentially been the same; all prophets, no matter where and when they were raised, preached basically the same message, with the same tenets and doctrines. This unified view of religious history is well-presented in those *surahs* (such as 21, *Prophets*) which contain a number of dialogues between prophets and their peoples. (b) The Qur'an presents prophets as model figures. At the same time, it would not allow them to be taken as superhuman. Dialogue is one of the media through which the Qur'an emphasizes their humanity. Moses, when commanded by God to go to Pharaoh, expresses his fears and reservations in words that might have been spoken by any ordinary mortal (26: 12-14). Similarly, when angels visit Lot in the form of young boys, members of his nation come to him and demand that the boys be handed over to them. Lot feels helpless and utters, as would any other human being in this situation, a cry of pain: "I wish I had the power to confront you, or could seek the protection of some powerful individual!" (11: 80).

3) Insofar as they illustrate Qur'anic themes presented in particular

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contexts, the Qur'anic dialogues can be said to make for continuity and coherence in the Qur'anic composition. If one recognizes the formulaic nature of the words and phrases signaling the beginning of a dialogue (see "Structure," below), one usually will have no difficulty in seeing the relevance of the dialogue to the context in which it appears and will be led to conclude that the dialogue, rather than causing a break in the discourse, serves to continue it.

There is another way in which dialogue makes for continuity and coherence in the Qur'an. In several *surahs*, of which S. 12 is the most conspicuous example, chains of dialogues are used to advance the plot of a story.

4) Qur'anic dialogues provide interesting insights into character. This can be illustrated with reference to three prophets, Moses, Abraham, and Joseph (cf. Qutb 163-70).

The Qur'an presents Moses as a strong-willed but also somewhat hot-blooded individual. The impetuousness of his disposition is well brought out in certain dialogues. We shall take two examples. In Q. 7: 150-51 Moses, upon his return from Mount Sinai, berates his people for worshipping the calf, and in particular takes Aaron to task for being remiss in his duty as Moses' representative. It is only when Aaron explains that his attempt to prevent calf-worship nearly cost him his life that Moses' anger subsides. In Q. 18: 65-82, Khidr, at Moses' request, allows Moses to accompany him on a journey, but warns him that he (Moses) would be unable to hold his peace when he observes Khidr committing certain acts. Moses promises to be patient, but of course his irritable disposition gets the better of him at every step, and Khidr tells him that they must part company.

The character of Moses is contrasted in the Qur'an with that of Abraham in some interesting ways. Abraham is an imperturbable, cool-tempered individual who anticipates every move of his opponent and acts accordingly, leaving room for some fun and play. In his dialogue with the priests (Q. 21: 62-67), which takes place after he has smashed all the idols in the temple, sparing only the chief idol, Abraham is asked whether he was the one who destroyed the idols. With his tongue in his cheek, Abraham denies the charge and blames the chief idol for the act, adding that the broken idols may be asked for verification—if they can speak. The priests, who are forced to admit that the idols cannot speak, are humbled. The dialogue brings into relief Abraham's characteristic use of irony and satire to defeat his opponent in a debate. In Q. 11: 75 Abraham is called a God-fearing man (*awwahun munibun*). In other words, the manner in which he con-

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ducts his dialogue—the Qur'an calls it "debate"—with God in regard to Lot's people (see n. 13 below) highlights another facet of his character.

Q. 12: 36-42 reports the dialogue between Joseph and his two prison-mates who have asked him to interpret their dreams. Joseph's reply is highly revelatory of his character: it shows his commitment to his religion, his modesty, and his tactfulness. The prison-mates have approached him for an interpretation of their dreams, because, they say, they have found Joseph to be a good, pious man. Joseph sees an opportunity here—an opportunity to acquaint them with his religion, to which he himself has remained loyal through all his ordeals. He assures them that he will interpret their dreams before long. Having bought some time, he confesses in all modesty that his knowledge of the interpretation of dreams is a gift from God. And having mentioned God—and it is, as he specifies, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—he explains his belief in the One God, very tactfully inviting his prison-mates to accept his religion. In the end he interprets their dreams.

5) Perhaps only a situation of dialogue can best capture the poignancy of certain utterances. Consider Q. 11: 72. Abraham's wife has just been told by the visiting angels that she will give birth to a son. "Woe to me," she exclaims, "shall I give birth, being the old woman that I am, with this husband of mine being as old as he is?" Any attempt to put this utterance into a third-person narrative would deprive it of its rich qualitative content, of the joy, surprise, and doubt that it so effectively reproduces. We will take a few more examples. We have seen Moses' reaction upon learning of the Israelites' calf-worship. In one version of the dialogue Moses is presented as seizing Aaron by the head and holding his beard, demanding an explanation. Aaron tries to placate him, appealing to him as a brother—*ya bna umma* ("O son of my mother!"). Only dialogue can convey the power and beauty of this appeal. Noah, upon watching his son drown before his eyes, addresses God, who had promised to save him and the members of his family (*ahl*),[8] and says: "My Lord, my son was of me, and your promise is true, and you are the best judge!" (Q. 11: 45). This utterance, which gives evidence of intense but controlled sorrow and is, on the one hand, a declaration of strong faith in God and, on the other, a polite request for an explanation of the event of his son's death, would lose its richness in indirect speech. In Q. 11: 61 the prophet Salih invites his idolatrous people to worship the One God. In their response (verse 62) the people begin by saying: *ya salihu qad kunta fina marjuwwan qabla hadha* ("Salih, you were a great hope of ours before this!"). The

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word *marjuwwan*, uttered in this situation, is extremely rich: it not only sums up the feelings of regret and despair at seeing a young man's talent gone awry, it also makes a powerful emotional appeal that, once again, cannot be conveyed in indirect speech.

6) Qur'anic dialogue tells us something about the history of the Qur'anic text. If, following Theodor Nöldeke, we divide the Qur'anic *surahs* into four categories—First Meccan, Second Meccan, Third Meccan, and Medinan[9]—we will notice that it is the *surahs* of the Second and Third Meccan periods that contain most of the dialogues. There seems to be a reason for this. During the First Meccan period Muhammad was an active preacher, but the Quraysh, the ruling tribe of Mecca, ignored him in the very early stages and, a little later, resorted to ridicule of him. Only beginning with the Second Meccan period did the Quraysh realize that the challenge posed by Muhammad's message was a serious one. They then began to criticize it in earnest: they raised questions, expressed doubts, and made objections. Without trivializing the whole issue, one might say that the Quraysh now entered into a "dialogue" with Muhammad and his followers. The opposition begun in the Second Meccan period continued into the Third. The *surahs* of these two periods are thus an accurate reflection of the dialogical situation that prevailed during a certain phase of Muhammad's prophethood.[10] These *surahs* constitute, in other words, a literary record of an important element of a given historical situation. After the Muslims' emigration to Medina in 622, a fundamental change occurred to them in this situation: consolidation of the community and establishment of a new society now became their main task, and, although revelation still had to answer questions and provide clarifications, in general the questions were asked by, and the clarifications provided to, the believers, who of course accepted the authority of the Prophet. The dialogical situation that existed in Mecca no longer existed in Medina. Accordingly, the Medinan period, though it is not entirely lacking in dialogue,[11] has very little of it, at least in the sense in which we speak of dialogue in the Second and Third Meccan periods. Thus the absence of dialogue in certain phases of Qur'anic revelation is as significant as its presence in others.

Together, these various reasons make a compelling case for studying the subject of dialogue in the Qur'an. In Section IV, we shall see, with reference to Q. 26: 16-37, that Qur'anic dialogues can be a rich quarry of meaning.

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A Question of Method

We noted above that a number of dialogues occur in more than one *surah* and, in view of differences of context, with variations. For example, in the dialogue between God and Satan, God commands Satan to bow before Adam (Q. 7: 11-18; 15: 28-44; 17: 61-65; 38: 71-85). In the dialogue between Abraham and his people, Abraham rebukes the latter for worshipping idols (19: 41-48; 21: 51-57; 26: 69-82). This makes study of these dialogues rather difficult. Theoretically, in a given case it would be possible to arrive, through abstractive synthesis, at a "proto-dialogue" which would furnish us with the complete picture as seen by the Qur'an. But, apart from the fact that such a reconstruction would be difficult to achieve, there is reason to believe that the different versions of a particular dialogue are, in each case, contextually relevant and that they cannot be reduced to a proto-dialogue without doing violence to the distinctive character and purpose of each version. Thus the appropriate method for studying such versions—in fact the appropriate method for studying any Qur'anic dialogue—would be to keep the Qur'anic text undisturbed and study the dialogues within the contexts in which they appear. In studying a dialogue, however, it is necessary to keep in mind other versions of it as well as any other relevant information the Qur'an might provide.

III. QUR'ANIC DIALOGUES: TYPOLOGY AND STRUCTURE

In this section we shall take a general look at the phenomenon of dialogue in the Qur'an. The next section offers an in-depth study of a representative Qur'anic dialogue.

Typology

The content of Qur'anic dialogues is no different than the content of the Qur'an as a whole. The principal themes and subjects are: the fundamentals of the teachings of the prophets, including the doctrines of monotheism and recompense; the attitudes and arguments of the nations addressed by the prophets; the character-traits of the believers and the unbelievers; general moral precepts; and, of course, divine power and wisdom. Using the criteria of speaker and content, the Qur'anic dialogues may be divided into several types:

1) Probably the most common type is the dialogue between a prophet and the nation to which he is sent.[12] A prophet presents his

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message but is met with defiance and rejection, or he criticizes his nation but his criticism falls on deaf ears. Two *surahs*, 11 and 26, contain a number of such dialogues: 11: 25-35 (Noah), 50-58 (the ancient Arabian prophet Hud [see also 7: 65-71]), 61-68 (Salih, another prophet of ancient Arabia); 26: 69-82 (Abraham), 106-22 (Noah), 123-40 (Hud), 141-59 (Salih), 160-75 (Lot [see also 11: 77-80]), 176-91 (Shu'ayb [see also 7: 85-89 and 11: 84-93]).

2) A number of dialogues take place between God and prophets. In these, a prophet is charged with a mission and encouraged to carry it out with resolution; a certain demand made by a prophet receives a response from God; or a prophet is given insight into divine acts. Examples are Q. 2: 260 (Abraham); 7: 143, 20: 11-48, and 28: 29-35 (Moses); Noah (11: 45-47).[13] A subtype is the dialogue between a prophet (or some other personage) and an agent of God: 51: 24-34 (Abraham and angels); 18: 65-82 (Moses and Khidr); 19: 17-21 (Mary and an angel).

3) A number of dialogues, usually involving ordinary human beings, have moral edification as their main aim: certain virtues are praised and certain vices are condemned: Q. 7: 113-26, 20: 70-73, and 26: 41-51 (Pharaoh and his magicians) shows the transforming power of faith, 5: 27-29 (Cain and Abel[14]) shows blind jealousy at work.

4) In some dialogues, the speakers are shown in consultation with one another: a matter has come up which needs deliberation. Two examples are Q. 12: 8-10 (Joseph's brothers) and 27: 29-35 (the Queen of Sheba and her courtiers).

5) Several dialogues are situated in the hereafter: Q. 74: 40-47 (people of heaven and people of hell); 7: 38-39 (mutual cursing of the people of hell); and 34: 31-33 (the arrogant and wicked leaders and the acquiescing followers [see also 40: 47-48]).

6) Two other types may be noted briefly. a) The Qur'an has a few examples of what is called one-sided dialogue: 2: 34-39 (God addressing first Satan and then Adam and Eve); and 31: 12-19 (Luqman giving advice to his son). b) 40: 23-44 belongs in a category by itself: there are several speakers, but hardly any listeners. The speakers include Moses, the Egyptians (taken as a group), Pharaoh, and a certain "believing person" who has kept his conversion to Moses' religion a secret but now breaks his silence and declares his support for Moses' cause. But no one, it seems, is paying any attention to what the others are saying. The impression one gets is that there are so many voices in the wilderness. It is true that the passage apparently depicts more than one situation, but it has the structure of a dialogue, and the dia-

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logue represents a state of utter lack, or breakdown, of communication. It in fact shows the futility of dialogue in certain situations. It is, in a sense, an anti-dialogue.

Structure

A Qur'anic dialogue often begins with some kind of a marker and ends with a comment.[15] The marker, which signals the beginning of the dialogue and also serves to integrate the dialogue into the larger narrative context, may be a short phrase (*idh/wa idh* + verb ["Recall the time when such-and-such an event occurred" (e.g. 2: 260; 5: 20, 112, 116; 15: 28; 26: 10; 38: 71)]; *fa lamma* + verb + *qala* ["When (such-and-such an event took place) so-and-so said" (e.g. 10: 76; 26: 42)]; *hal/wa hal ataka hadithu fulanin* ["Has the news of so-and-so reached you?" (e.g. 20: 9)]; *wa tlu 'alayhim naba'a fulanin* ["Relate to them (O Muhammad) the story of so-and-so" (e.g. 5: 27; 26: 69)]; *a lam tara* ["Did you not see/notice?" (e.g. 2: 246, 258)]), or a statement to the effect, for example, that God sent a certain prophet to a certain nation, the statement paving the way for relating the ensuing conversation between the prophet and the people (Ss. 7, 11, and 26 have many examples). The comment, which draws the appropriate moral from the dialogue, usually consists of a statement of the consequences of defying God or disobeying the prophet (Q. 5: 26; 18: 42-44; 38: 85), or of a pronouncement by God that those who believed in a certain prophet became victorious or were saved (2: 250); whereas, the disbelievers were destroyed (7: 72; 26: 120, 139, 158, 189).

A dialogue may stand alone (of this, of course, there are many examples), it may be embedded in another dialogue (Q. 11: 71-73), or it may be juxtaposed to one or more dialogues, with which it may or may not be causally connected (Ss. 11, 20, and 26 contain several examples).

A dialogue usually has two speakers. But more than two speakers may be involved with, for example, A and B opening the conversation, and then B conversing with C and then with D. In Q. 20: 86-98, Moses, returning from Mount Sinai and having learnt of the Israelites' worship of the calf, first reprimands the people, then addresses Aaron, and finally speaks to the Samaritan who had made the calf.[16]

Not infrequently, dialogues contain parenthetic observations (*tadmin*), which amplify, or extend the application of, the point being made. For example, in 20: 47-59, verses 53-56 constitute a *tadmin*, and in 29: 16-25, verses 18-23 and the second half of verse 24 are a *tadmin*. Occasionally, a dialogue may have an aside, as in 51: 25, where the words *qawmun munkarun* ("These people are strangers!") are an aside.

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IV. ANALYTICAL STUDY OF A QUR'ANIC DIALOGUE: 26:16-37

In the foregoing sections we have referred to many Qur'anic dialogues, and have also discussed some of them briefly. In order to show how the Qur'an uses dialogue to present its themes, how its dialogues fit into the contexts in which they occur, and how they reveal character, it is necessary to make an analytical study of at least one of the more elaborate dialogues. Q. 26: 16-37[17] is a good candidate for such a study. It illustrates an important Qur'anic theme: namely, that those who deny the truth would not be convinced even if they were shown miracles. The first nine verses of S. 26 present that theme, and verses 16-37 are offered as a substantiation of it, the dialogue thus bearing an integral relation to the context.[18] Furthermore, the dialogue, which takes place in an intensely dramatic situation, is a study in Qur'anic characterization. Moses is, along with his brother Aaron, sent by God to Pharaoh to demand the release of the Israelites. In the dialogue that follows between Moses and Pharaoh, each speaker tries to drive the other into a corner, shows studied disregard for the statements made by the other, and attempts to weaken the other's position by disaffecting him from his followers. By the time the dialogue ends, a drastic shift in the "bargaining positions" of the two disputants has taken place, and the latent tension in the situation, held in check by the relatively soft opening remarks, has become only too manifest. Let us look at the passage in some detail.

Moses and Aaron are instructed by God to go to Pharaoh as prophets and ask him to let the Israelites go:

> Go to Pharaoh and say, "We are messengers of the Lord of the universe: send the Israelites with us." (Verses 16-17)

Although Moses and Aaron are not actually quoted as repeating the message, the Qur'an implies that they do so, or that Moses does so on behalf of both, for immediately afterwards Pharaoh's reply is reproduced:

> He said, "Did we not raise you in our midst as a child? Did you not stay among us for so many years of your life? And did you not commit the act that you did, being ungrateful?" (18-19)

This reply is remarkable for what it tries to achieve. Moses has made a demand in the name of a nation. Pharaoh disregards the nationalistic aspect of the demand. In fact he disregards the demand altogether, addressing Moses not as a representative of the Israelites but as a private individual. In doing so, he is not only implying that

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the Israelites are insignificant—literally not worth speaking of—he is also trying to co-opt Moses by reminding him, on the one hand, of the favors bestowed on him in the past by royalty (Moses was brought up in Pharaoh's house and lived among the Egyptians for many years), and, on the other, of his act of killing an Egyptian (see Q. 20: 40; 28: 15, 19, 33). The implication is that, if Moses withdraws his demand, it could result in a resumption of royal favors and a remission of the punishment due to him, but that insistence on the demand could have dire consequences, for Moses is culpable both morally and legally: morally, because he is an ingrate; legally, because he is a killer. The cunning Pharaoh has offered the carrot and, at the same time, waved the stick.[19]

The situation would seem pretty hopeless for Moses, for Pharaoh has presented facts which Moses cannot deny. Moses says:

> I committed the act at a time when I was in a state of ignorance.[20] Then, fearing you, I ran away from you, and my Lord gave me wisdom and judgment, making me a prophet. As for that favor, you cite it as a favor to me on the ground that you have reduced the Israelites to slavery! (20-22)

In his accusation of Moses, Pharaoh saved the most damaging piece of evidence for the end—Moses' murder of an Egyptian. Moses, realizing the seriousness of the charge, decides to deal with it first. He does not deny that he killed the man but explains, first, that he was at that time in a state of ignorance,[21] and, second, that he fled the country not because he wished to escape punishment—no punishment was due to him to begin with, for the act was unintentional and committed only in order to protect an Israelite against an Egyptian who appeared to be the aggressor (see Q. 28: 15)—but because he was not sure that an Israelite could, even if he was in the right, expect justice from the Egyptian legal system. Having replied to the charge of murder, Moses turns to the favors enumerated by Pharaoh. Note a deliberate omission on the part of Moses. Pharaoh counts the upbringing of Moses as one favor, and Moses' stay among the Egyptians as another. The latter, however, was no real favor, for Moses had stayed of his own free will, and that is why Pharaoh says "you stayed" (*labithta*) rather than "we granted you the permission to stay." Moses, therefore, ignores this "favor." The former, however, was a real favor, and Pharaoh seems to be justified in taking credit for it. Moses offers a brief but pungent response. The particle *an* in verse 22 is used quite strategically by him and, depending on how one construes it grammatically, will give to the verse one of three related and equally valid meanings:

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1) Had you not persecuted the Israelites, my mother would not have been forced to put me in the river, so that I would not have been picked up by the members of your household, who would not have brought me up, and today you would not have been in a position to cite it as a favor to me (Zamakhshari 3: 111).

2) The favor you speak of—is it in reality any other than the persecution of the Israelites by you? For how insignificant is the favor done to me as an individual in comparison with the wholesale persecution of the Israelite nation, of which I, too, am a member, sharing in its suffering! (See Zamakhshari 3: 111)

3) I grant you that I was a recipient of this favor. But it is ludicrous that you should on that account consider yourself justified in persecuting the Israelites. That right you surely do not have.

Moses has not only avoided the trap set by Pharaoh, he has incriminated Pharaoh. Upon entering into Pharaoh's presence, Moses introduced himself as a messenger of the "Lord of the universe" (verse 16). In his first response to Pharaoh, too, Moses speaks of "my Lord" (verse 21). Having failed to distract Moses, Pharaoh must now consider the demand made by him. But first he tries to laugh off the idea of the Lord of the universe:

> Pharaoh said, "And what is this 'Lord of the universe'?" (23)

The question obviously is a sarcastic one, Pharaoh using the word "what?" (*ma*) instead of "who?" (*man*). We can imagine Pharaoh twisting his tongue as he pronounces the words "Lord of the universe" (*rabbu l-'alamin*).

Moses now has Pharaoh where he wants him—or so he thinks. Disregarding the sarcasm in Pharaoh's question, he treats the question as a serious one and provides a serious answer. Let us review a few more verses along with that answer:

> He [Moses] said, "The Lord of the heavens and the earth and everything that is between them—if only you were open to conviction." (24)
> He [Pharaoh] said to those around him, "You hear that, don't you?" (25)
> He [Moses] said, "Your Lord and the Lord of your ancestors of earlier times." (26)
> He [Pharaoh] said, "This prophet of yours who has been sent to you surely is deranged!" (27)
> He [Moses] said, "The Lord of the east and the west and all that exists between them—if only you used reason!" (28)
> He [Pharaoh] said, "If you set up anyone other than me as your deity, I will definitely put you in jail." (29)
> He [Moses] said, "Even if I should present something clear and explicit?"[22] (30)

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> He [Pharaoh] said, "Present it, then, if you mean what you are saying." (31)
> He [Moses] cast his staff, and there it was—an unmistakable serpent! And he drew out his hand, and there it was—shiny white, for all to see! (32-33)

Several points need to be noted about this passage. First, the pace of the dialogue has quickened considerably. The opening exchange between Moses and Pharaoh was conducted in a more discursive fashion, with arguments presented and rebutted in some detail. That no longer is the case. The short but pointed question by Pharaoh ("And what is this 'Lord of the universe'?") imparts to the dialogue a staccato quality that is maintained thereafter. Second, Moses now has the initiative, and he presses his advantage relentlessly, showing confident disregard for Pharaoh's responses, just as Pharaoh did in the beginning. Pharaoh is clearly on the defensive, and is desperately looking for a way to retreat honorably. Third, Pharaoh's question enables Moses to focus on the central thesis of his message as a prophet—monotheism—and he sticks to the subject, whereas Pharaoh again tries to sidetrack him by making fun of him. Fourth, Moses not only sticks to the subject, he presents it in successive statements in such a way as to close in on Pharaoh and cut off his retreat. To understand this, we need to take a closer look at verses 24, 26, and 28.

In verse 24 Moses makes a broad, general statement: God is the Lord of the heavens and the earth. Pharaoh of course does not claim to be the Lord of the heavens and the earth, but, in denying him that position, Moses is paving the way for another argument, to be made in verse 26, namely, that only such a being can be the Lord of men, and the claim of Pharaoh precisely is that he is the Lord of men. But Moses does not stop there. He goes on to say, in verse 28, that God is the Lord of the east and the west. This is not a repetition of verse 24, for if Pharaoh thought of himself as an incarnation of the Sun-god (see Islahi 4: 643), then the verse is saying that the east, where the sun rises, and the west, where it sets, are both under the suzerainty of God, and that God therefore is the Lord of Pharaoh as well, Pharaoh in this respect being no different from the other human beings. Verses 24, 26, and 28 are thus related to one another in two ways: 1) verse 24 is general (God is the Lord of the entire universe), verse 26 is specific (God is the Lord of mankind), and verse 28 is even more specific (God is the Lord of Pharaoh); 2) verse 24 is the basis of the conclusion drawn in verse 26, and verse 26, in turn, becomes the basis of the conclusion drawn in verse 28.

Pharaoh, who has so far done a good job of hiding his anger and irritation, can take it no longer and bursts out into threats. At the begin-

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ning of the dialogue, Pharaoh, confident that he had Moses under his thumb, was in a somewhat playful mood. Now it is Moses who will play with Pharaoh. When Pharaoh issues his threat of imprisoning Moses, the latter, quite self-composed, asks Pharaoh if he would carry out his threat even if he (Moses) were to present a miracle in support of himself. This offer by Moses must have intrigued the courtiers, and Pharaoh, apprehensive that he might otherwise lose face with his courtiers, permits Moses to present what he wants to. Moses performs two miracles which obviously impress everyone. But Pharaoh does not give up. He acknowledges that Moses has performed remarkable feats, but refuses to accept them as miracles, trying to explain them away as magic tricks. Here is the remaining part of the dialogue:

> He [Pharaoh] said to the nobles around him, "This man is a cunning magician. It is his plan to expel you from your land by means of his magic. What line of action do you suggest?" (34-35)
> They said, "Respite him and his brother. Send into cities agents to fetch every magician with masterly skill." (36-37)

Here Pharaoh plays another card: he tries to persuade his courtiers that Moses, crafty magic-monger that he is, entertains political ambitions and plans to occupy the country, expelling the Egyptians from it. The nobles suggest that Pharaoh handle the matter with caution. If Moses is a magician, then he should be beaten at his own game. The thing to do, then, is to invite accomplished magicians from all over the country and have Moses compete with them. There is little doubt, the nobles think, that Moses will come to grief at the hands of the magicians. The story continues in the *surah* (see verses 38 ff.) though the dialogue between Moses and Pharaoh here comes to an end.

In this analysis of the Moses-Pharaoh dialogue I have omitted discussion of certain elements (e.g. the clever use of pronouns by the speakers) which are significant but would have taken too much space to discuss. For the sake of economy, again, I have not made reference to the other versions of the dialogue in the Qur'an. But the discussion has, I think, shown that the Qur'anic dialogues deserve close study, and that such study can only promote our understanding of the Islamic scripture.

V. QUR'AN, BIBLE, AND *JAHILI* POETRY

Qur'an and Jahili *Poetry*

The principal form in which the literary genius of pre-Islamic Arabia expressed itself was poetry. In that poetry, of which we possess an enormous quantity, we do come across the feature of dialogue. But

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there are two main differences between the use of that feature in *Jahili* poetry and the Qur'an: (a) in the former it occurs with much less frequency and, (b) when it does occur, usually takes the form of one-sided dialogue—for example one person addressing his beloved or his enemy in what may be called an imagined rather than a real dialogical situation. The content of the dialogues in *Jahili* poetry is of course identical with that of the poetry in general, which means that the ethical note, so conspicuous in the Qur'anic dialogues, is absent from them. But even from a strictly literary viewpoint, they are hardly, if ever, revelatory of character. The Qur'an's use of dialogue as a literary device thus sets the Qur'an apart from pre-Islamic Arabic literature in a significant way. A related point needs to be made here.

In spite of the wealth of its vocabulary, the richness of its imagery, and the vigor of its idiom, *Jahili* poetry had severe limitations as a carrier of social philosophy. Although a good Arab poet had social influence, tribal chiefs often possessed good poetic talent, and poetry was used to incite tribes to war and action. *Jahili* poetry was, in the last analysis, the impassioned utterance of an individual soul. The characteristic subjectivity of that poetry accounts for its power and lyricism, but, being independent of a coherent and dynamic matrix of thought, that subjectivity rendered *Jahili* poetry unfit to serve as a vehicle for social reform or uplifting. The Qur'an, however, was something altogether different. It burst upon the Arabian scene with a focused, socially-oriented, and forward-looking message that before long generated a movement of thought and laid down a plan of action. The Qur'an began by challenging Arab society and culture and supplying alternative models. By its very nature, then, the Qur'an was "dialectical": it provoked discussion and invited reaction. And the dialogues of the Qur'an, as we noted earlier, document that discussion and reaction.

Qur'an and Bible

But if, in its use of dialogue, the Qur'an is conspicuously different from *Jahili* poetry, it is strikingly similar to the Bible—especially to the Old Testament. Like the Bible, the Qur'an frequently employs the technique of what Alter calls "narration-through-dialogue" (69),[23] and the surahs of the Second and Third Meccan Periods furnish many examples of this. Thus in S. 11, which consists of 123 verses, we have, beginning with verse 25, a series of dialogues in all of which, with the exception of one (that between Abraham and the angels, verses 69-76), prophets engage in a dialogue with their peoples (Noah: 25-49; Hud: 50-60; Salih: 61-68; Lot: 77-83; Shu'ayb: 84-95).

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Besides the technique of narration-through-dialogue, several other similarities between the Bible and the Qur'an are notable. Robert Alter writes:

> Where literary convention requires writers to make all their characters follow in their speech the decorum of normative literary Hebrew, allowing only the most fragmentary and oblique indications of a personal language, of individual tics and linguistic peculiarities, differentiation is brought out chiefly through contrast. The technique of contrastive dialogue is all the more feasible because the fixed practice of biblical narrative, with only a few rather marginal exceptions, limits scenes to two characters at a time—or sometimes, to the exchange between one character and a group speaking in a single voice as a collective interlocutor. (72)[24]

Like the Bible, the Qur'an employs normative literary Arabic,[25] with the difference that Qur'anic Arabic represents linguistic usage of a shorter historical period and is thus more consistent. Qur'anic dialogue, like Biblical dialogue, usually involves two speakers who are distinguished from each other on the basis of the content of their speech rather than on their linguistic peculiarities. Finally, like the Bible, the Qur'an, in portraying character, provides little visual detail, focusing the reader's attention on the substance of the speech in question. But, for all these similarities, there is a major difference between the Bible and the Qur'an.

According to Josipovici, "the world of the Old Testament is on the whole the world of everyday life, of people talking, quarreling, cheating, lying and helping each other, just as they do in normal life" (140). This, as a rule, is not the case with the Qur'an. Open the Qur'an at any page and you will hear an imperious divine voice that drives all before it, insistently projecting a set of master themes—monotheism, prophecy, Judgment Day—that make up a single, dominant viewpoint. In other words, the Qur'an possesses greater theological rigor: while in the Bible theology sometimes recedes into the background—though without disappearing—,the theology of the Qur'an always remains in the foreground, as the exceedingly frequent Qur'anic references to the power, omniscience, mercy, justice, and other attributes of God would indicate. This in turn means that the relationship between narration and dialogue in the Qur'an is a little different than in the Bible: narration in the Qur'an does not simply perform the function of summarizing and establishing connections (cf. Alter 75), it also lays down the parameters within which dialogue will take place, setting the terms and conditions of dialogue, and furnishing guidelines for "correctly" evaluating and interpreting a given dialogue.

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Alter (ch. 4), Sternberg (505 ff.), and others speak of the use of the art of indirection in the Bible. The Qur'an would appear to be using indirection to a much lesser degree, though a better way to put it would be that the Qur'an employs the techniques of indirection and direct statement both.

We analyzed Q. 26: 16-37 in the previous section. Exod. 5: 1-5, 7: 10 ff. may, with reservations, be called the Biblical counterpart of this dialogue; I say "with reservations" because the two dialogues are not perfect analogues. A few similarities and dissimilarities may nevertheless be noted. The Qur'anic and Biblical accounts are similar in that in both (a) God commands Moses and Aaron to go to Pharaoh, (b) the miracle of the staff is performed, and (c) Pharaoh refuses to let the Israelites go. They differ in that (a) the Qur'anic account is more detailed, (b) in the Qur'an it is Moses (as against Moses and Aaron in the Bible) who converses with Pharaoh and performs the miracle, and (c) in the Qur'an the miracle is performed on the same day and during the same meeting in which Moses demands the release of the Israelites. In view of its length and considerable dramatic element, Q. 26: 16-37 is quite representative of Qur'anic dialogues and admits of intensive study, whereas the same is not, perhaps, the case with the Biblical passages that make up its counterpart.

VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this paper I have attempted to underscore the importance of dialogue as a literary feature of the Qur'an. This feature, I have argued, is both conspicuous and significant. The Qur'an has a variety of dialogical situations, and its dialogues serve, among other things, to point up certain teachings of the scripture and reveal character. One of the ways in which the Qur'an differs from *Jahili* literature is in its (the Qur'an's) characteristic use of dialogue. Qur'anic dialogue, however, is quite similar to Biblical, though in one or two crucial respects the two are different. Our study of Q. 26: 16-37 suggested that Qur'anic dialogues admit of, and reward, close analysis. There are several areas that call for further investigation.

First, it is necessary to study a number of individual dialogues. The analysis offered of Q. 26: 16-37 may suggest the lines along which such study can be undertaken. Also, I have suggested that the different versions of a given dialogue, occurring in different *surahs*, appear to be relevant to the contexts in which they appear. Preliminary research has led me to this view, but clearly an in-depth examination of the

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subject is needed. Thus, Q. 26: 16-37, discussed above in detail, could be compared with 20: 47-59, each with reference to its context.

Second, in Section II we noted a number of reasons for studying the feature of dialogue in the Qur'an, and they can serve as the basis for an independent study. Likewise, in Section IV we saw that Qur'anic dialogues fall into several distinct categories, and each of those categories contains a sufficient number of dialogues to make an independent study possible.

Third, if the different versions of a dialogue are integrated each into its context, and if, furthermore, Qur'anic dialogues mirror historical situations in Arabia in Muhammad's times, then an important question arises: To what extent are the Qur'anic dialogues realistic and to what extent are they stylized? That is, how much of poetic truth—in the Aristotelian sense—do they have, and how far is their content explicable in terms of the need to fit them to the particular historical situations in Muhammad's life which they are supposed to reflect?

Fourth, a comparative study of dialogue in the Qur'an and the Bible would be highly desirable. Our discussion of the subject in Section V was confined to offering general observations, and that for the following reason. A prerequisite for undertaking a more thorough comparative study of Qur'anic and Biblical dialogues is establishment of good analogues, and an attempt to meet that requirement would have taken us too far afield. The choice of Q. 26: 16-37 for intensive study (Section IV) was not very helpful in this respect, for the Biblical counterpart of this dialogue, as we noted (Section V), is not a good analogue of it. A possible solution would be to take representative dialogues from the Bible (for example the exchanges between Job and his interlocutors) and the Qur'an, irrespective of whether they make true analogues or not, and study the motifs and strategies involved. But this, too, requires separate treatment.[26]

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NOTES

1. Henceforth "S." will be used as the abbreviation of *surah* when a reference is given; likewise, "Ss." = *surahs*. The abbreviation "Q." stands for Qur'an.

2. Referring to the "striking dialogues" that are to be found not only in S. 12, but also in S. 19 and "many other *suras*," Johns calls the Qur'an "a mosaic of voices" (32).

3. Identified by some modern writers as Cyrus.

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4. For example, Q. 7: 104-12 makes up one dialogue, verse 113 begins another. The stipulation does not, however, necessarily exclude what may be called "collective dialogues," those in which the speakers are not individuals but groups, and which may represent several conversations telescoped into one. An example is Q. 4: 19-13, in which earlier nations, taken as a group, respond to their prophets, who are also taken as a group.

5. Khidr (or Khadir) is the name tradition has given to the person called in Q. 18: 65 one of the servants of God.

6. Josipovici makes the interesting observation that "The Bible . . . shows us both the primacy of dialogue and the frequent refusal of dialogue" (143). In the Qur'an, too, the refusal to hold a dialogue can be significant. While Q. 4: 164 indicates that the divine-human dialogue may represent divine mercy shown to man, 2: 174 ("God will not speak to them [wicked people] on the Day of Resurrection" [see also 3: 77]) clearly indicates that dialogue refused may signify apathy or anger.

7. Literally, "those who rebel [against God]." The word *taghut* in this verse is used as a plural.

8. See Q. 11: 40, where Noah is instructed to get the members of his family into the Ark "except those who have become subject to a pre-existing [divine] decree." Noah, still hoping that his son is not one of those subject to that decree, utters the words quoted in 11: 45.

9. The four-fold categorization was first proposed by Gustav Weil. See Welch 5: 416.

10. Of the Second Meccan period, Ss. 18, 20, 26, and 27, and, of the Third Meccan period, Ss. 7, 11, 12, and 28 are notable for their dialogical content.

11. Of the Medinan *surahs*, S. 2 has a few notable dialogues.

12. This includes the dialogue that takes place between a prophet and one or more representatives of a nation.

13. Another example is Q. 11: 74-76, which refers to Abraham's *mujadalah* ("debate, argument") with God. Not much detail is provided, but it is clear that it is the same intercession of Abraham with God that is reported in Gen. 18: 22-33.

14. The two names do not occur in the Qur'an.

15. By convention, of course, every dialogue contains the formulaic phrases introducing the speakers, *qala/qalu* ("He/they said"), etc.

16. See also Q. 2: 23-29 (Potiphar's wife, Joseph, Potiphar, the witness, Joseph).

17. Briefly discussed in my article, "The Qur'an as Literature," in *Religion & Literature*, 20 (1988) 1: 61-62.

18. This passage is part of a larger passage (Q. 26: 11-68) which narrates the story of Moses and, together with the stories of six other prophets in the *surah*, presents the thesis that there are many people who would refuse to believe even if their demand for "signs" (*ayat*), i.e. miracles, is met, that God in the end saves the believers and destroys the unbelievers. All these stories mirror the Meccan situation in which Muhammad faced the stiff opposition of the Quraysh, one of whose demands was that Muhammad show miracles in support of his prophecy.

19. I think the carrot is in the foreground, the stick in the background. At this early stage in the dialogue Pharaoh is being conciliatory. A successful attempt at co-opting Moses would, moreover, render meaningless Moses' demand for the freedom of the Israelites. It is for this reason, I think, that Pharaoh's reference to Moses' life in the royal place and among the Egyptians is made in clear, specific terms (verse 18), whereas his reference to the murder is made in vague terms (verse 19).

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20. The Arabic, *mina d-dallin*, is difficult to translate. Moses is referring to the pre-prophetic years of his life, when he was "unenlightened," and possibly implies that he acted in haste.

21. See previous note.

22. That is, a miracle.

23. Robert Alter's phrase (69). Analyzing the story of David's meeting with Ahimelech at the sanctuary of Nob (1 Samuel 21), Alter speaks of "a general trait of biblical narrative: the primacy of dialogue is so pronounced that many pieces of third-person narration prove on inspection to be dialogue-bound, verbally mirroring elements of dialogue which precede them or which they introduce." He continues: "Narration is thus often relegated to the role of confirming assertions made in dialogue—occasionally, as here [David-Ahimelech encounter], with an explanatory gloss." (65).

24. Note also the following observation by Alter: "In a mode of narration so dominated by speech, visual elements will necessarily be sparsely represented" (70).

25. The Qur'an claims to use "clear, standard Arabic" (*'arabiyy mubin* [Q. 16: 103; 26: 195]), and it is generally agreed that the language of the Qur'an is the *koine* of Classical Arabic poetry. See Welch 5: 419.

26. I gratefully acknowledge the help I received, in the form of comments and criticisms, from the editors of *Religion & Literature*, Professors Thomas Werge and James Dougherty, and an anonymous reviewer.

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